# SEASONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR LABOR IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

Agriculture in the United States is a highly seasonal occupation and the requirements for labor on farms vary greatly according to the farming operations performed during each period of the year. This seasonal variation in the amount of labor required is significant on the majority of farms even though agriculture has a large labor force directly attached to it which is for the most part resident on the farm and available throughout the year. Seasonal increases in the amount of labor needed are met by a more intensive application of effort by the family and hired labor already on farms and by the employment of additional hired labor.

The type of farming practiced determines for each geographic region of the United States the seasonality of agricultural operations and, therefore, both the degree of variation in labor requirements and the particular months of heaviest needs. Types of farming, described according to the principal crops grown or livestock products produced, have been regionalized and mapped by the Department of Agriculture. For nine of the major regions a calendar of operations has been prepared and is given in Figure 1.

The United States total of seasonal labor needs is shown in the first chart of Figure 2. Also given in Figure 2, as an illustration of the differences between regions, are the patterns for the corn, cotton, and small grain regions. There are two periods of peak seasonal requirements in the United States as a whole, one in May-June-July during the planting and cultivating seasons, and a second in September-October during the harvest season. For the cotton region there appear two greatly accentuated peaks representing the chopping and the picking periods in cotton growing; for the wheat and small grain region there is a single peak occurring during harvest; in the Corn Belt, a double peak prevails with the heaviest labor requirements in the earlier, midsummer period.

The accompanying map, "Periods of Peak Seasonal Labor Requirements in Agriculture in the United States," presents a generalized description of seasonal labor needs, regionalized according to type-of-farming areas. For purposes of simplification the detailed type-of-farming areas have been classified into nine labor-peak regions, each of which the pattern of labor requirements is fairly uniform. The third region, for example, has a May-June and September-October divided peak and comprises the Cotton Belt and the field bean, sugar beet, and Ozark fruit areas.

In each area there are individual farms which differ from the prevailing type of farming and therefore from the prevailing pattern of labor requirements. Such farms have labor peaks similar to those which are described for other areas in which their type of farming is generally followed.

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Note: Figures 1 and 2 are from "Seasonal Employment in Agriculture", Works Progress Administration, 1938

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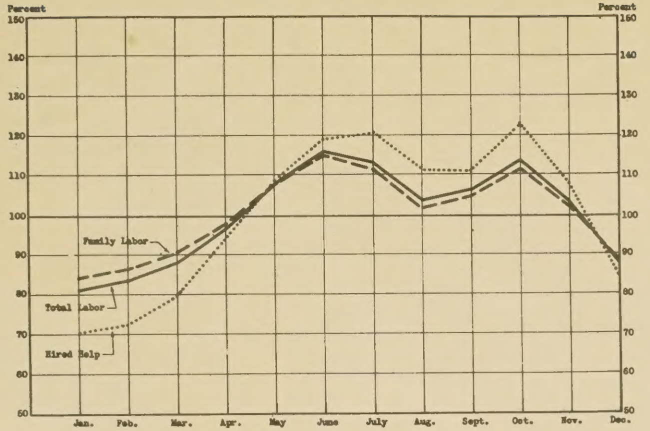
FIGURE 1 - MAJOR AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES DURING EACH MONTH OF THE YEAR, BY CROP AREAS A/

| Month | United States | Crop Area | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Corn | Cotton | Wheat, small grains | Dairying | Range live-stock | Truck | Fruit | Special crop areas | General mixed farming |
| Jan. | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull |
| Feb. | Slight rise | Slight rise | Some plowing | Seeding extreme south | Slight rise | No rise | Harvest in south | Picking extreme south | No rise | No rise |
| March | Spring work starts | Plowing | Planting, extreme south | Seeding | Plowing and seeding | Plowing and seeding | Planting early crops | Clearing orchards | Plowing, some planting | Slight rise |
| April | Spring work is extensive | Preparing soil for planting | Planting | Seeding | Seeding | Work on irrigated land | Spring planting and seeding | Pruning | Planting | Spring work |
| May | Spring work continues | Planting | Chopping | Haying | Planting and haying | Haying and planting | Picking early crops, planting | Picking berries, pruning | Planting, thinning beets, etc. | Haying, planting corn, etc. |
| June | Harvest | Planting and cultivating | Chopping | Harvest | Harvest | Harvest | Picking and planting | Picking | Picking and planting | Harvest |
| July | Harvest | Cultivating | Chopping | Harvest | Harvest and haying | Harvest decline second half | Harvest green vegetables | Summer low | Picking early crops | Harvest |
| Aug. | Summer decline | Summer decline | Summer decline | Summer decline | Summer decline | Summer decline | Canning season | Summer decline | Summer decline | Summer decline |
| Sept. | Fall rise | Cutting, silo-filling | Picking | Seeding winter wheat | Silo-filling, haying | Fall rise | Fall harvest of vegetables | Picking | Harvest sugar beets, tobacco, etc. | Corn cutting |
| Oct. | Fall peak | Shocking, husking, fall plowing | Picking | Seeding winter wheat | Fall decline | Harvest special crops | Picking | Picking | Harvest of late crops | Fall decline |
| Nov. | Winter decline | Husking | Picking followed by winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline | Winter decline |
| Dec. | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull | Winter lull |

A/ The table indicates the major farm activity in each crop area. It does not take into consideration other activities in these areas that require additional hired labor.

SEASONAL VARIATION IN FARM EMPLOYMENT
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1925-1936*

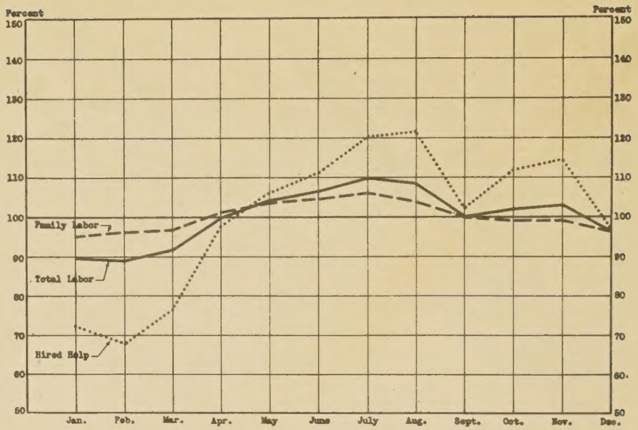


* The index of seasonal employment has been computed by expressing the figure for the first of each month as a percentage of the centered twelve month moving average.

Source: National Research Project, Works Progress Administration.

WPA 2964

SEASONAL VARIATION IN FARM EMPLOYMENT
IN THE CORN AREA, 1925 - 1936*



* The index of seasonal employment has been computed by expressing the figure for the first of each month as a percentage of the centered twelve month moving average.

Source: National Research Project, Works Progress Administration.

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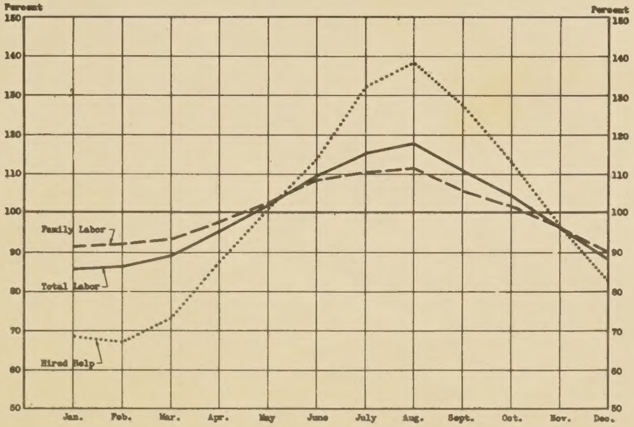
SEASONAL VARIATION IN FARM EMPLOYMENT
IN THE SMALL GRAIN AREA, 1925-1936*

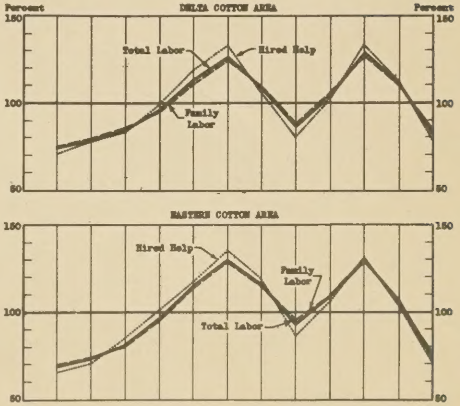


* The index of seasonal employment has been computed by expressing the figure for the first of each month as a percentage of the centered twelve month moving average.

Source: National Research Project, Works Progress Administration.

WPA 2962

SEASONAL VARIATION IN FARM EMPLOYMENT
IN THE COTTON AREAS, 1925-1936*



* The index of seasonal employment has been computed by expressing the figure for the first of each month as a percentage of the centered twelve month moving average.

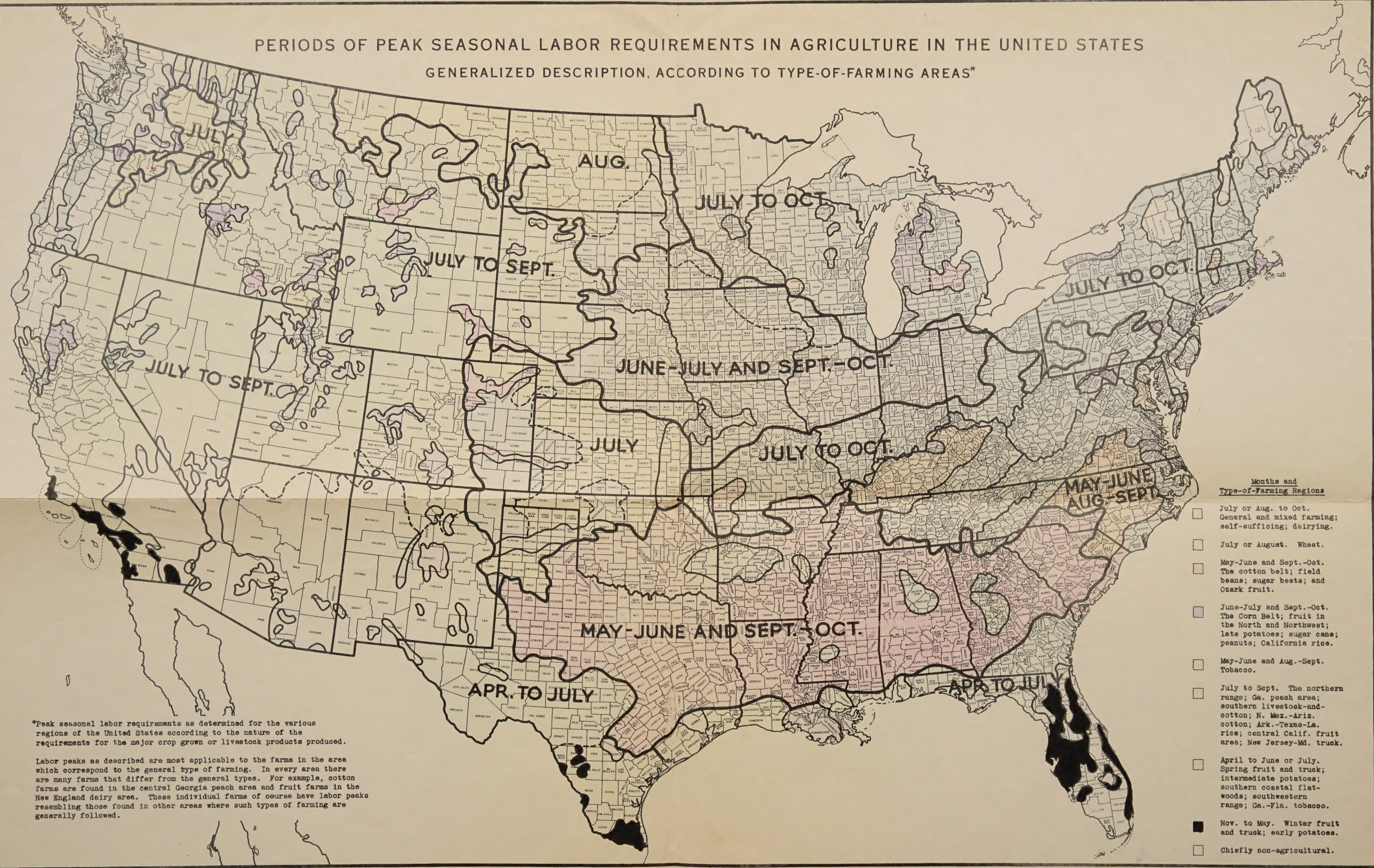
Source: National Research Project, Works Progress Administration.

WPA 2959

FIGURE 2

# PERIODS OF PEAK SEASONAL LABOR REQUIREMENTS IN AGRICULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

## GENERALIZED DESCRIPTION, ACCORDING TO TYPE-OF-FARMING AREAS*



**Months and Type-of-Farming Regions**

| | |
|---|---|
| ☐ | July or Aug. to Oct. General and mixed farming; self-sufficing; dairying. |
| ☐ | July or August. Wheat. |
| ☐ | May-June and Sept.-Oct. The cotton belt; field beans; sugar beets; and Ozark fruit. |
| ☐ | June-July and Sept.-Oct. The Corn Belt; fruit in the North and Northwest; late potatoes; sugar cane; peanuts; California rice. |
| ☐ | May-June and Aug.-Sept. Tobacco. |
| ☐ | July to Sept. The northern range; Ga. peach area; southern livestock-and-cotton; N. Mex.-Ariz. cotton; Ark.-Texas-La. rice; central Calif. fruit area; New Jersey-Md. truck. |
| ☐ | April to June or July. Spring fruit and truck; intermediate potatoes; southern coastal flat-woods; southwestern range; Ga.-Fla. tobacco. |
| ■ | Nov. to May. Winter fruit and truck; early potatoes. |
| ☐ | Chiefly non-agricultural. |

*Peak seasonal labor requirements as determined for the various regions of the United States according to the nature of the requirements for the major crop grown or livestock products produced.

Labor peaks as described are most applicable to the farms in the area which correspond to the general type of farming. In every area there are many farms that differ from the general types. For example, cotton farms are found in the central Georgia peach area and fruit farms in the New England dairy area. These individual farms of course have labor peaks resembling those found in other areas where such types of farming are generally followed.

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